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Breaking Gender Roles And Societal Expectations In Half Of A Yellow Sun

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Abstract

This article explores the subject of gender roles and analyses how those gender roles are depicted in the society with special reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun. Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie is an acclaimed Nigerian author. Based on the gender roles and behaviour the characters in this novel encounter such situations in their life. This paper also shows the stereotypes that are presented in the society. Gender issues are relevant to variety of fields and that explore the effects of gender in one field which contributes to the understanding of gender in another field.

Keywords: stereotype, motherhood, adoption, social constructs

INTRODUCTION

Gender roles are behaviors that men and women exhibit in the private and public realm. Blumer defines, "Gender roles are prescribed behaviors that are appropriate for women and men"(23). The history of the term 'Gender Roles' is coined by a psychologist Dr. John Money, founder of The Gender Identity Clinic at John Hopkins University in 1950s. He proved that the gender roles are constructed just to help the male gender. It shows how the repeated conditioning of gender role is used as a tool by men to suppress all genders, so the dominant gender can hold power within our socio-political structures. It promotes ideas such as men should be physically and emotionally strong, ambitious while women must stay at home and obey the others.

In reality, men and women to an extent, are not born with these characteristics, but societal expectations lead to confusion and resentment within relationships. Society has a set of expectations about how men and women should behave, dress and present themselves. Every society, ethnic group,

and culture have gender role expectations but they can differ from place to place. In general, Africa has long standing beliefs concerning gender roles, and most are based on the premise that women are less important, or less deserving of power than men. Most of the African traditions are male centered and male dominated.

In twentieth century, the economic and political developments presented African women with new opportunities. African women began writing with a wide range of themes like gender inequality, social expectations, position and role of women in marriage etc. Changes in gender roles and in the education of women led to a new set of writings. Contemporary female African writers such as Helen Oyeyemi, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have come up with writings of Activist Feminism. Today, the African literary scene plays host to many writers and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one among them, a female Nigerian born writer.

Through her works, Adichie stresses on how society should raise children based on abilities and interests, instead of gender roles. Her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set in Nigeria during the Nigerian-Biafran war of 1960-1970 and focuses the personal relationship between Olanna and Odenigbo. The novel revolves around two sisters, Olanna and Kainene. Olanna marries Odenigbo, an intellectual who teaches at a university, while Kainene forms a relationship with Richard an English man who is a writer. The war and its conflicts throw the four into a world they never expected along with Ugwu who is Odenigbo's house boy. This novel gives a picture of Nigerian Civil War that changed the perspective of the people regarding gender. Women were always looked as submissive, meek who were denied of all rights. They faced the issue of identity as the society never gave them a stature they deserved.

The assignment of gender roles subjugates woman and gives pressure of 'manliness' on men. While women are expected to cook, clean, nurture and sacrifice, men are taught to be the main earners of the family. American Feminist, Betty Friedman in her *The Feminist Mystique*, addresses the creation of an ideal image of women- domesticated, nurturing and compliant. She calls it "the problem has no name"(2). In *Half of a Yellow Sun* Ugwu, the house boy wishes to cook for his mother when she was sick. But he has never told anyone not even to his cousin Anulika. She has already told Ugwu that he has spent too much time around women cooking, and he might never grow a beard if he kept doing that. On the contrary Ugwu's mother smacks Anulika's bottom for not bending properly to sweep. She says "sweep like a woman! she would say" (HYS 3).

Another instance is that Odenigbo's mother ridicules Ugwu on his cooking. She says, "What does a boy know about real cooking? Does a boy belong in the kitchen?" (HYS 95). There is a stereotype in society that household chores should be done by women. A boy in a family is taught to occasionally help his father and allowed to play outside, while a girl is repeatedly instructed to learn cooking and household cleaning jobs. Many are still policing gender roles out of fear of being ridiculed for not being 'manly' or 'feminine'. In *Pots and Politics*, the second wave feminists explained that cooking should not be considered a feminine task as "People of both sexes eat; people of both sexes cook"(5).

In Adichie's book, *Dear Ijeawle, A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* she says that cooking is a domestic work and a life skill that both men and women should ideally have. It is also a skill that can elude both men and women. Adichie recalls that she was instructed in her childhood to bend down properly while sweeping, like a girl which meant that sweeping was about being female. "I wish I

had been told simply, ‘bend down and sweep properly because you will clean the floor better’. And I wish my brothers had been told the same thing”(DI 9).

Women around the world are constantly bombarded by societal expectations when it comes to marriage. For most young girls, getting married and having children are their greatest goals in their lives when they reach a certain age. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Arize, Olanna’s cousin thinks that her marriage is more preferential than dealing with a job. Arize says, “I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to husbands’ houses” (41). Adichie writes “A marriage can be happy or unhappy but it is not an achievement. We condition girls to aspire to marriage and we do not condition boys to aspire to marriage, and so there is already a terrible imbalance at the start”(HYS 30). Unfortunately our society bring up girls, educate and hone their skills with a subtle motive to find a ‘good’ husband. However boys are not taught to view marriage the same way as girls.

African society, grows up in believing stereotypical thought that the educated women will not obey their husbands. The perception of Odenigbo’s mother about educated reflects this idea. She says, “Too much schooling ruins a woman; everyone knows that. It gives a woman a big head and she will start to insult her husband. What kind of wife will that be? (HYS 98). Because of these kinds of thoughts in the society, most young girls prefer to marry rather than go to university. Gender expectation adds hardship to females as they are still expected to submit themselves to a typical gender role while their academic life is less valued.

Societal norm pertaining to woman’s fertility and reproduction soon after marriage is a pressure to newly married couples. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Arize, Olanna’s cousin is poked by her mother-in-law and urges Arize to confess how many abortions she had before marriage. Arize’s husband worries when she did not get pregnant for three years. The social pressure toward early parenthood still exists in our society. Women who doesn’t have a child have to undergo many challenges in the society and become victims.

Society still considers birth of a baby girl as a tragedy. Anulika, Olanna’s cousin wants to have a baby boy so that she can place her feet firm in her husband’s house. Odenigbo’s mother does not want to keep her own grandchild as she is a girl child. In addition to this, Odenigbo’s mother says that her grandchild is a baby boy then she will have somebody to keep her company and fellow women will not call her as a mother of an impotent son. The preference for boy child is motivated by economic, religious, social and emotional desires and norms that favor males and makes female less desirable. Gender inequality is present all over the world.

Adichie breaks the stereotype of women holding high positions in the institutions. In the business world, Women leaders are still a minority. Women working in male dominating industries face a variety of challenges including societal expectation and beliefs about Women’s leadership abilities, pervasive stereotypes. Adichie presents Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an independent, strong headed woman where she runs her father’s business. Her father proudly says Kainene is “like a son” when she takes on the family business. Kainene remains fearless in the end.

Adoption is still an alien topic and Adichie brings this unconventional path to motherhood through Olanna’s character in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Olanna adopts Amala’s child despite the fact that the baby is a girl. On the day of adoption, Olanna feels restless that she feels compensated by discovering

something in her. As Ugwu narrates, “She shifted this way and that in bed that night. She had not felt sorry for the child. Instead, holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be”(HYS 239). This mark a bold step in bringing the required change in the society. In Indian context, most people are adopting girl children these days. It has been a societal change in terms of awareness.

Half of a Yellow Sun is written in an African context, that exposes the social and cultural norms that women in African societies are experienced. Extreme gender stereotypes are harmful because they do not allow people to fully express themselves and their emotions. It is also harmful to feminine folks to feel that they are not allowed to be independent smart or assertive. So in order to bring out a change, society should identify the social conditioning that has slotted into assigned gender roles, and work meticulously to unlearn. Gender equality should begin at home, and families are at the front lines of change. Educating children about women’s right, importance of education, accept and respect all genders will break gender roles and societal expectations. Adichie, in this novel addresses different social constructs through the characters which help the reader to relate and there by tries to make a change in the perceptions of the people. This analysis represents women and men’s gender identities and its implications on these stereotypes that are presented in our society.

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